Understanding Janet Frame II: landscape and identity

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“On the rim from the farthest circle from the group was my normal place”

*(To the Is-land)*

Abstract

Janet Frame is one of New Zealand’s most highly acclaimed writers. While Part I of this series focussed on a general introduction to her life and works, this paper will focus on the question of identity in her novels, and will briefly highlight her use of native landscape to express her subjects’ struggles with marginality and life in the borderlands in reference to her first three novels. In conclusion, the relevance of this theme for an advanced Japanese college literature course will be considered, and an appropriate program of reading suggested.

Introduction

Janet Frame (JF in this paper) wrote 11 novels, a three-volume autobiography, and several volumes of short stories and poetry. Although she did not intend to present social criticism, when loosely grouped, her works do show the progress of social development in NZ; the early novels focus the individual struggle for identity, the middle novels show an increasing concern with identity in a burgeoning affluent society, and the later novels are much con-
cerned with the power of language to create and negate existence. Her novels, however, are kernels of truth about marginality as she experienced it, and she deliberately prevents us from taking her literally by including magical events—sudden deaths, disappearances, resurrections, and strange unreal happenings. JF then, writes on the waves of experiential contingencies, not the pathways of realistic cold fact.

JF presents her subjects as caught in dualities such as light/dark; sane/insane; dream/reality; being/not-being; here/elsewhere, in contexts such as mental hospitals (Owls do Cry, Faces in the Water), journeys to discover identities (The Edge of the Alphabet, Living in the Maniototo, the Carpathians), in efforts to "fit in" (Adaptable Man, the Rainbird, A State of Siege), and in her search to discover the power of language in identity-making (using metafictional technique throughout her all her works, but very prevalent in Living in the Maniototo and the Carpathians). JF’s focal concern was to show consciousness as a subject of literature, this consciousness invariably being in some way a marginalized one.

Her first three novels Owls do Cry, Faces in the Water, and The Edges of the Alphabet, were written between 1957 and 1962 when she was in her late 20s, early 30s. They are considered a trilogy for their thematic similarity, and are often referred to as her psychological novels due to the dense individual mental musings of the subjects.

The Elsewhere—and the search for identity

JF grew up in “the elsewhere”, marginalized by poverty, a unique appearance and an unusual up-bringing. The struggle to establish her own identity, as an individual and a writer, in post WWII, post-colonial New Zealand lead first to years in mental institutions, and then to long periods of time abroad and in reclusive living (see Wilby, 2006b). JF writes in Beginnings (Dudding:1980) that finally she chose “that” world (of the imagination, of writer on the margins), rather than “this” (social, conventional) world, and later she wrote in her
autobiography . . .

Out of a desire to be myself, not to follow the ever-dominant personalities around me, I had formed the habit of focusing in places not glanced at by others, of deliberately turning away from the main view . . . I recognized [...] a skill in looking elsewhere or, looking at the general view, [and] seeing an uncommon sight . . . (To the Is-land p. 158)

**Literary Characteristics of her Novels**

Uniquely, JF presented her dualistic themes, indicative of modernism, in a post-structural way producing polyphonic novels where ‘all characters, including the narrator are possessed of their own discursive conversations and all discourses are interpretations of the world with no one standing above the others’ (Allen, 2000 p.23) thus making her a scriptible (writerly) writer; one ‘who produces a text in which the reader is required to be an active producer of meaning in a process of co-creation with the writer’ (Barthes, see Allen, 2000), rather than a lisible (readerly) one, in which a text is presented in ‘product focused conventional narrative leaving the reader in the role of a passive consumer’ (ibid). The primary function of JF’s writing was to write her own truths, without concern for the readers’ sense of reality, allowing for the concept known in post-structuralism as intertextuality/ transpositioning, ‘where the words become one’s own through the act of ‘appropriation’’ (Allen, 2000 p. 29) in a process of negotiating an understanding.

When this scriptable/writerly approach to truth is given to the consciousness of the marginalized, as in her trilogy, (her subjects being mental patients, eccentrics, children, seekers, artists, exiles — those who are relegated to, or who choose to inhabit, the borderland), JF creates their inner turmoil to communicate what they socially and conventionally cannot, but she does this in a very unconventional way using dense double-voiced language and covering a wide
and experimental range of stylistic technique. In addition to the full range of more conventional stylistic techniques, she also uses various on-going and re-occurring metaphors (mirror for imagination, hawk for materialism), poetry, dream sequences, interior monologues, and juxtaposition of thoughts and feelings; in fact, asking the reader to partake in the subject's own sense of aporia, confusion, social isolation and searching.

To further highlight being 'out on the rim', JF places her characters in plots that range over considerable distance and time, further contributing to a thinning of their external personas, and does not develop them any further by offering highly described personalities with in-depth histories; rather she takes her characters' lack of power and identity as subject, their marginality and inner-turmoil as theme, and expresses this in landscape and nature imagery to evoke emotional content, recognition and empathy. In *Living in the Maniototo*, JF has her narrator interject and say:

"I have to cry out here that language is all we have for the delicacy and truth of telling, that words are the sole heroes and heroines of fiction"(p.92)

Highlighting this lack of plot line coupled with dense emotional expression, the narrator in *Faces in the Water*, now freed from 9 chapters in one mental hospital in the South Island with a. . . . 'But the train moved, and I slept, and I did not care. Cliffhaven [mental hospital] was far, far away . . . Then begins another 9 chapters in another mental hospital the very next page with a mix of the dense and sparse, and a heavy calling on NZ landscape imagery:

So I went up north [North Island, NZ] to a land of palm trees and mangroves like malignant growths in the mud-filled throats of the bays . . . . the sky faultless and remote. . . . I stayed with my sister . . . I did not know my own identity. I was burgled of body and hung in the sky like a woman of straw. The day seemed palpable about me yet receded when I moved to touch it, for fear I might contaminate it. I nagged at the sky. It grew a
protective porcelain filling of cloud. . . therefore I found myself . . . in . . . Treecroft Mental Hospital, up north. (Faces, pg.78.79)

Identity and Landscape

JF, gifted with the ability to write about identity on several levels, focused on the marginalized in 5 ways:

1) Identity . . . one’s own, at the psychological level; the inner borderland
2) Identity . . . an individual in relationship to society; the borderland of society
3) Identity. . . an individual’s place in the identity of one’s home country in relation to other countries; the global borderland.
4) Identity . . . gender; social conventions based on gender, both male and female.
5) Identity . . . as an effect of language; JF’s focal concern.

JF extensively used the concept of landscape in relating the inner musing of subjects, using the literal geographic landscape to mirror the mind. Landscape, the physical outlay of the land, conjures up images as seen in travel brochures, descriptions in a Hardy novel, the atmospheric prelude to a movie, or conversely the close and structured nature of a landscaped garden, or the skyline of a city. However, as JF was organically tied to the landscape of NZ, her home environment, much of her imagery arises from her childhood memories and experiences, thus her landscapes are also domestic and magical. She does not give landscape description as a background “filler” or to “set the scene” but uses it to express emotions directly. The landscape imagery is crucial and raises the minute details of her writing to a palpable immediacy. In her trilogy, she uses landscape to express and evoke feelings in the following three areas.

1) Landscape: bildungsroman, youthful awakenings; though often dark and
ominous

2) Landscape: to express the psychological state of mind; in turmoil or struggle

3) Landscape: to express a social place in time; issues of gender, post colonialism

JF has brought some criticism that her writing is too reliant on local landscape (see Wilby 2006a). This is difficult to concede without also insisting on the same criticism of any other great writer; what is more “local” than the landscapes of the Grapes of Wrath, Bronte’s Withering Heights, or Joyce’s Finnegans Wake—from a non-American, non-English or non-Irish viewpoint? The very locality of the landscape imagery is a challenge and a reward of any reading of a literary novel. JF’s use of landscape has contributed enormously to her recognized greatness as a writer.

Identity one; individual mind

The novels *Faces in the Water* and *Owls do Cry* (in part) are set in mental institutions. However, these works are not a referential, objective look into NZ mental hospitals of the time; it was never the point to give a fair and unbiased view. *Faces* presents a patient’s personal experiences of institutional life, her shock, her observations of other inmates, and her struggle to find identity. However, JF’s narrator writes from a first person dasein viewpoint — a being there — in such detail readers can almost be forgiven for thinking they are reading an ethnographical write up or an autobiography. Although JF takes pains to point out that she is not that 1st person (the cover page of *Faces, An Angel at My Table*. p.69 and elsewhere), she writes about the inner soul in such contextual detail it seems it could only have come from a personal or a participant observer viewpoint. On reading her autobiographies and other novels, it is clear that her family and her experiences indeed inform all her writings, and that she presents
the reader with fictional embellishments as a way to communicate truths based on these experiences. Thus like an ethnographer, she writes rich, thick text, but unlike her nemesis, she does not present triangulated detail for readers, who are left to negotiate meaning from the interplay of the subject’s viewpoint, and their own experiences.

JF’s subjects in the psyche novels are very singular. Where there is more than one, as in *Owls* and *Edges*, she deals with them individually, and their paths rarely cross directly in any depth or complexity. JF does not give a detailed external view of her characters; there are few physical descriptions, little in the way of backrounding, case histories or official diagnosis or discussions of them, and rarely any sub-characters with the function of adding to the understanding of the protagonists. She frequently uses paratactic coordination to create immediacy (the many strings of ‘ands’ giving lengthy but speedy relating of events/feelings and creating a very child-like or harried viewpoint), and only rarely uses hypotactic subordination to allow the reader logical extensions to characters and events. That JF does not construct an objective image, but rather only the subject’s inner discourse, highlights her works as very post-structuralism in character.

At the beginning of her subject’s third stay in a mental hospital, now relying heavily on southern coastal rural NZ images to present double-voiced metaphors, the narrator says,

I stayed at home [after release from Treecroft] for six weeks. Until one night, when the phosphorescent skeletons were piled high in the paddocks for burning and grinding, and the literature wind was distributing near and far its own cultured manures, and the compulsive sea was going and coming with eternal news of itself and recent summer intimations of humanity—ice-cream cartons and orange peel — and the texture of the trees and the people in the sky seemed to have been applied like papier-mâché soaked in light . . . I found myself [back] in Cliffhaven . . .
Identity Two: the individual in society

This is a rich field of study and critique, too extensive to cover in this paper. However, Perry’s comment (1987:177) of JF’s autobiography (written between 1982–5 and featuring NZ landscape on every page), that ‘the autobiography is . . . about how a sense of difference is socially constructed, about the connection between social relations and a sense of self”, also holds true of her novels. Although JF withdrew into the “mirror city” (her metaphor for the world of the imagination) early in life as her own individual response to her social environment, comments about the society of the time can easily be extrapolated for discussion. More important in her novels than the particular sociological, political settings of NZ, however, are the landscapes of identity these settings allow her to work with; the landscapes of mind, soul, the yearning to be (to be noticed, someone, not a no-one, or an everyone, or an anyone), and once again the reader is advised to remember JF wrote fiction of her experiences, not necessarily sociological fact.

Although the individual’s place in society is better seen in other novels, there are several classical Frame sequences in her trilogy, especially in Owls and Edges where difficulties of social identity often appear in more single voiced metaphor, simile, and subject commentary, and with more direct and geographical landscape imagery.

[on leaving the mental hospital] I felt no longer human. I knew I would have to seek shelter now in a hole in the earth or a web in the corner of a high ceiling or a safe nest between two rocks on an exposed coast mauled by the sea. . . . (Faces. p. 210)

For it is the rule: human beings must live in clusters, hanging like grapes from the scaffold, or in flocks like sheep in a bleating panic from the hawk
Identity three: the borderline: NZ and living abroad

JF’s trilogy is a wonderful entry into identity three, with *Owls do Cry* most clearly highlighting the post-colonial environment of NZ in the 1950s. However, it is *The Edges of the Alphabet*, where post-colonial identity, confusion and fusion abound, that most directly confronts this theme. In this novel the narrator accompanies three people, an English woman, an Irish man and a New Zealander on a voyage from New Zealand to England. In her own life JF faced such a voyage, as well as the same tensions these characters do re: identity, ethnic origins and their complex relationship with the “new” and the “old” countries. Thus her subjects, who meet aboard ship and loosely continue contact after arriving in England, are confronted with the tensions and confusions of the colonial tag, as well as individual degrees of alienation, both past and present ; the novel highlighting how subjects, including the narrator, carry around their various “borderlands”.

... What do you think of God’s Own Country? (NZ idiom)
I remember ... Wellington ... And the whole land lay flushed, its past flaking from it like dead skin, in a fever of tomorrow (*Edges*, p. 449)

If you go overseas, Toby, visit the places where your ancestors lived. I have their chin and their nose, registered parcel of history delivered to the womb’s door. ...

You pegged your ancestors on the line between the work-socks and the blankets and they bubbled cleanliness and kicked in the breeze and were slapped in the face by the oak leaves that got up one morning to wash their faces in death. ...(*Edges* p. 254–5)
[at a fairground “funny mirror” booth; double metaphor, with mirrors also referring to imagination].

. . . He looked for the mirror which would show himself, Toby Withers, his distant identity, but in all the images he stared at, he was nowhere to be found . . . Why had he surrendered the right to be himself? Why had the mirrors given him the terrible responsibility of being other people? He had been driven from himself as a rabbit is driven from its burrow, and here he was now, unprotected, unhoused, like a rabbit alone under a sky of circling hawks [typical South Otago image]
The mirrors had stolen his very shape and rearranged it into something which did not belong to him . . . The mirrors and the world blurred. Darkness came . . . the next morning . . . . Toby . . . arranged for his return to NZ. (Edges pp. 493–4)

Hawes (1995), in discussing the issue of post-colonial identity in explaining JF’s taking of a third identity in Britain (as a West-Indian, and also once in NZ as a Pacific Islander), references the theories of “othering”, “cross-dressing”, and the taking of a double-self, that go to the heart of the identity confusion of disempowered persons. Bakhtin (in Allen, p.28) says “language for the individual consciousness lies on the borderland between oneself and the other”, thus it is no surprise that the issue of the borderland is a major theme in JF’s works (see Ball A. 2005).

However, in JF’s personal case, other issues may also be at play: 1) humour; after all, NZ is an island in the South Pacific, and this sounds more exotic than “New Zealand”; it is of interest as to why she did not introduce herself as coming from Aotearoa (Land of the Long White Cloud), the largely unknown native name for NZ. — perhaps it was too unknown. 2) New Zealanders in Britain are from the elsewhere, but a vaguely very British elsewhere, creating particular problems of identity for academics and artists. From JF’s view, it may have been more comfortable to have the identity of a truly different foreigner,
rather than that of a 2nd rate somewhat embarrassing cousin. Whatever the truth of JF’s personal ‘othering’, at the heart of her writing is the inner conversations of the subjects, who are all othering themselves in an effort to “see” and find themselves, many from the margins of their home countries:

The ugly duckling who became a swan was not really the loneliest among the ducklings. The loneliest was the true ducking who felt himself to be a stranger in his own family. His story has not been written in the fairytale. Few suspect his condition — for after all he was living with his own species in his native square of farmyard. (Edges p.419)

Identity four: Gender

The issue of gender identity, like that of social and political identity, is easily extrapolated from JF’s novels. However, again she remains less concerned with particular issues per se, than she is in the main subject’s discourse and inner conversation on gender perspective, both male and female, and since the gender focus in the trilogy is often cast to the mother and father, the landscape imagery is frequently domestic, rural and reminiscent. Of great interest in JF’s work is that gender encompasses not only feminist concerns, but also issues of the male in society, and as such her works do not fit a strict Feminist perspective. Such themes are, however, very pertinent and suitable for both gender and NZ studies, as more can be understood and appreciated in her novels if the reader has some background knowledge of New Zealand. All three books in the trilogy have excellent sequences situated in domestic and nostalgic landscapes;

And standing there on the scaffolding high above the people passing in the street, with Toby [his son] on the end of the board hammering and wrenching . . . he felt lonely so close up to the sky, not the rewarding and proud loneliness he had felt when driving the train at night across the
Identity Five: language

The role of language in identity is a central concern of many fields of human study from its role in basic questions of what is identity, is it innate, nurtured, imposed by community, nation, historical time or God, determined by individual choice, or discovered, to its influence in the issue of loss of identity. In literature it manifests in understanding ways in which subjects/characters are written in stories, to the extent one can be conscious of this, and talk about it.

One of JF’s central techniques was the use of what post-modernism calls, metafiction. This is fiction that talks about its own fictionality, or where a narrator comments on the process of writing, or directly addresses the characters in the story. It is writing sensitive to its own reliance on the word.

... I am going to write a book [thought Toby] ... Do you want words, Toby, in a wheel-chair of italics, words forced to their knees, begging pity? or whole words standing without support without floodlights ... or [like a] tree in a harmony of ... inspired obedience ... (Faces p.299)

In Edges as Toby’s ship sets sail for Britain to ‘meet the ancestors’ and write his book ‘the Lost Tribe’; he reacts to the band’s playing of the “Skye Boat Song”

“Toby was feeling lonely ... [he hears the line ‘born to be king’ and is suddenly bashful]...

Why that’s me! As if words had arrived (overcoated, demi-veiled) to embrace the wordless —why that’s me.

It is difficult to live here on the edge of the alphabet, Toby. [interjects
the narrator] I have tried to find the words for you. I look for advice to give you. But how can I give you advice when no one will advise me? (Edges p. 289)

Perhaps it was the frequent use of metafiction that lead JF to comment that she considered her works to be “explorations” rather than novels which come with classical plotlines and assumptions of truth. Students wishing to pursue this theme are directed to Living in the Maniototo where the subject narrates her struggles with deception and elusive reality in the process of writing fiction, JF moving the physical landscape that illuminates a world of replicas and dualities between NZ and USA, and to the Carpathians in which the narrator uses language about language to write about his deceased American mother’s search for identity in rural NZ during her final years.

Relevance of studying JF’s Work

Although JF’s novels are no more difficult than Joyce, Lawrence or Wolf, the difficulty of her writing is often cited as the reason for the absence of her works in most literature reading lists in schools, including in her native New Zealand where only a few poems and short stories are studied in senior high school, and of her other works only Owls do Cry and the autobiographies are read, in “high flier” classes. Given the large volume of diverse reading genres English teachers must cover, it is not surprising they cannot devote the time necessary to do justice to JF’s works. However, her works are also applicable to culture, gender, and New Zealand studies, and are quite suitable for college students, who have more maturity, and specialist classes.

Given the many identity crises facing a world of very post-colonial countries, many still struggling with issues of identity and individual expressions of it, the movement of diverse peoples around the world living in close proximity to the “other”, and of increasing alienation in society of not only the youth,
but also the middle-aged and the elderly, JF has much to say on how people feel (rather than feel about) loneliness and ostracism, and she communicates expertly the sense of inner confusion the marginalized have. The ‘difficulties’ of her language are an integral part of that confusion thus helping to expand the readers’ store of responses to it, and encouraging them to look to their own landscapes for expressions of their feelings.

A look at JF’s early novels is excellent for this purpose. Her later novels, with their depths of intricate metafiction are perhaps more challenging, but they are also excellent in raising student awareness to issues of language and labelling. Thus for an advanced EFL college class in Japan, I would recommend the autobiographies (To the Is-land, An Angel at My Table, and The Envoy from Mirror City) for background, and any or all of Owls, Faces and Edges for study, as this trilogy covers her essential techniques and perspectives. If time is too limited for a novel, her children’s book; Mona Mimin and the Smell of the Sun which can be read at multi-levels, gives an excellent introduction to “essential Frame”; particularly to issues of identity, expressed here in garden landscape.

**Suggested methodology for advanced classroom study**

1) Reader-response perspective; first bring students into the interpretative community (Wilby, 2006b), or state as prerequisite to the course that students be familiar with literary techniques.

2) Raise student schemata with discussions of identity issues, capitalizing on native Japanese love of landscape and literature, considering an historical, cultural and social perspective

3) Watch the movie An Angel at My Table (JF’s autobiography) to elicit themes and to feed-in background relevant to NZ and its landscape, and to Janet Frame herself.

4) Use Task-based methodology; students, working in study groups, interact with each other to share and discuss their reactions from teacher pre-
pared worksheets that have a variety of language, comprehension, im-
pression and open-ended thematic questions; teachers anticipating vo-
cabulary and conceptual and metaphoric difficulties, and utilizing jig-
saw, project and other ESL techniques. Since JF’s writing is scriptible
(thus transformative rather than transactional), students need not fear
their reactions will be wrong; there is no “wrong”, there is only experi-
ence and impression.
5) Encouragement; to continue reading, to read for effect/affect. It is my
own experience that as JF ‘recyles’ images and metaphors throughout
all her works, they get easier to read with every novel read.

Conclusion

Although JF. novels defy a clear literary definition; her place in literature is
special. She was post-modern, writing with a perspective considered as belong-
ing to post-structuralism before the main names associated with these theories
were writing them, and yet she dealt with basically modernist themes of binary,
and unequal opposites. JF’s unique blend of the formats of structuralism and
post-structuralism give students an opportunity to discover these techniques.
Thus her novels present an excellent opportunity for students to not only meet
a New Zealand writer, but also to investigate many of the literary perspectives
they may have been studying thus far in their literature courses. Students of
literature should be introduced to a wide variety of works that have influenced
the world of literature; JF is highly recommended for this challenge.

And does JF resolve the question of marginality? Well, she never set out to
solve it, but as the narrator says on the last page of The Edge of the Alphabet;

Home?

The edge of the alphabet where words crumble and all forms of commu-
nication between living and dead are useless. One day we who live at the
edge of the alphabet will find our speech.

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